

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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HINCHEY LEADS COLLEAGUES IN URGING THAT OFF-ROAD VEHICLES ISSUE BE ADDRESSED WITHOUT DELAY

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-26) today sent a letter to the director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) urging the agency not to defer the designation of off-road vehicle (ORV) routes. The letter to BLM Director Kathleen Clarke is signed by Hinchey and ten of his fellow members of the House Appropriations Committee.

"One of the most powerful tools we have in the effort to protect resources is good information," said Hinchey. "By delaying ORV route designation into the future, the BLM will be denying us the use of this tool indefinitely. They will also be defying legal mandates and renege on their commitment to resolve ORV issues through the planning process.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 264 million acres of public lands in the West. Ecologically critical, these lands provide millions of acres of key big game habitat for antelope, elk, and other species, and habitat for 400 species of songbirds. All-terrain vehicles, dirt bikes, dune buggies and other ORVs increasingly threaten these public lands. Uncontrolled ORV use causes soil erosion, destroys plants, fills streams with sediment, spreads invasive weeds, and harms wildlife. According to the BLM's own data, ORV use is allowed in some form on approximately 93 percent of our public lands in the continental United States.

Since the 1970's, ORV-specific Executive Orders and regulations have obligated the BLM "to protect the resources of the public lands, to promote the safety of all users of those lands, and to minimize conflicts among the various uses of those lands" by designating areas and trails as "open," "limited," or "closed" to ORVs. Current regulations dictate that all ORV designations must be established in Resource Management Plans (RMPs), comprehensive documents that establish management objectives for each land unit and provides the public with information so that, among other things, they can locate appropriate locations and routes to hike, bike, and use ORVs.

In 2000, the BLM proposed and implemented an aggressive agenda to develop a new generation of RMPs for all of its public lands. Congress responded, appropriating nearly \$25 million in fiscal year 2001 and \$33 million in fiscal year 2002.

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Hinchey and his colleagues recently learned that the BLM is amending its land use planning manual and handbook by directing field staff to delay ORV route designation to a secondary planning process known as travel management. In addition to opposing the change, the signers of the letter also object to the amendment being implemented without opportunity for public comment.

"Instead of using these increased appropriations to resolve ORV issues through the planning process, BLM is rushing the completion of plans to speed up energy development, Hinchey added. "This is detrimental to the public, including the many responsible ORV users who want clear guidance on where ORV use is and is not permitted"